

## Welcoming Remarks

Remarks by: Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, Director of the Pan American Health Organization

The Pan American Health Organization is pleased to welcome ....

Josefina Carbonell, Assistant Secretary of Aging in the Department of Health and Human Services; members of the Policy Committee of the White House Conference on Aging; members of the Advisory Committee, International observers...

The Pan American Health Organization celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday three years ago and like many individuals in our new world, we continue to thrive. Our mission is to work, in collaboration with our Member States, in building better health for all throughout the Americas.

We are pleased that the White House Conference on Aging has invited the international community to be part of this important policy event for the USA. We all have much to learn and much to contribute in meeting the goals proposed by the UN for a *Society for All Ages*. We are pleased to host this event as an opportunity for many of you to meet and share your knowledge of aging around the world. Together we should find better ways to bring the gift of longevity to every corner of our Region. This requires a vigilant fight against premature aging and disabilities caused by poverty and lack of access to quality health care; and promote a more secure world for all vulnerable populations.

Aging is a life long process that embraces all generations and impacts both individuals and families. Over 92 million persons 60 years of age and older live in the Americas; one out of every 4 homes in Latin American include an older person and families continue to provide the majority of resources for caring for the young and the

old. Aging permeates the fabric of our lives. In the Americas we can celebrate that many more individuals are living longer and better; yet far too many live their old age in poverty, with poor health and in isolation. Aging has both an unfinished agenda from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and an important new challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The demographic triumph of the past century faces new and emerging epidemics of transmissible and non-transmissible diseases, pandemics, violence and terrorism. We must face these challenges.

For most of the developing nations in our hemisphere the window of opportunity for developing and implementing a compassionate, comprehensive, cost-effective aging policy is closing rapidly. Much work has to be done; many priorities with limited resources compete for attention. However, the ultimate challenge for society and policy makers is to value the life of each human being without discriminating because of age; sex, ethnic background or race. Delays in planning for our aging population will result in greater intergenerational dilemmas and in poorer use of limited resources.

Three years ago, the world met in Madrid to face the challenge of rapid population aging at the UN Assembly on Aging; the blueprint that emerged in the International Plan of Action on Aging has provided the guiding principles to shape policy for the international community.

For most countries in our region the rapid increase of older persons in need of services, including long-term care, is a major policy challenge. The majority of human resources in health are unprepared to meet these challenges; national budgets have not anticipated the cost of delivering health care for uninsured older adults and the health

care system has to be adapted to the special needs of older populations. PAHO/WHO is working in collaboration with all our Member States in all of these areas. We are very pleased to have produced the first data base on the health of older persons in urban areas of Latin America and the Caribbean. We have developed two strong networks to support the training of both researchers and practitioners in public health and geriatrics. In collaboration with our colleagues at the World Health Organization, we have tested the framework for 'senior friendly' health centers in five countries in this region (Peru, Chile, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname); and we are providing technical assistance for monitoring the response of the health system to the International Plan of Action on Aging, 2002 as requested by the World Health Assembly in 2005.

Throughout the communities in our region we have the means to promote active and healthy aging. It is time to make the decisions to guarantee that primary health care will be reoriented to provide a friendly environment with efficient services for older adults. And we must ensure that our primary health care initiatives are well coordinated with the community and the hospital to ensure continuity of care.

The goal of reducing the burden of disability in old age is a new challenge for this century and is one of the strategic objectives of the UN International Plan of Action on Aging. The USA has been successful in reducing the rate of disability. The challenge for 'poor' countries is to become old before becoming 'rich'. Aging will affect everyone, without regard to age, sex, race or social status; we hope that longevity will not be seen as the privilege of those *who are rich* while the *poor and neglected populations* become vulnerable to premature aging and disability.

On Tuesday at 2:30 p.m. PAHO/WHO will provide a briefing of WHO global and regional work in the area of aging and health. We invite you all to come and participate, ask questions, share your experiences with us.

Lastly, we thank you for joining us today. I hope that this evening, in an informal and friendly environment that we have planned for you, you find the opportunities to meet and exchange experiences with the advisory and policy committees, with delegates and other observers to the White House Conference on Aging as well as with PAHO staff. We all wish you a very productive participation in the busy agenda prepared for you.